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ABSTRACT

The definition of teacher stress is presented along with a brief description of its manifestations. Statistics are offered regarding the causes and severity of teacher stress. A major focus is put upon the real role and ego ideal of teachers, chronic discipline problems, and frustration with poor student achievement. Three processes for helping to improve teacher job satisfaction are outlined: (1) team teaching; (2) matching of students and teachers according to learning style and teaching style; and (3) the development of an ongoing support system. The ongoing support system includes the formation of voluntary small groups, venting sessions, strength showing groups, concrete task groups, and social groups. (Authors/JD)

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TEACHER STRESS: AN ANALYSIS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO BURNOUT

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Teacher Stress: An Analysis and Possible Solutions to Burnout

Abstract: A definition of stress and brief description of its manifestations will be presented. Statistics regarding the causes and severity of teacher stress will also be highlighted. A major focus will be an analysis of stress in terms of conflict between the real role and ego ideal of the teacher; chronic discipline problems; and frustration with poor student achievement. Processes to help the teacher improve job satisfaction will be outlined. The use of team teaching; the matching of students and teachers according to learning style and teaching style; and the development of an ongoing support system are keys to the solution of the problem. The ongoing support system will include the formation of the following types of grouping patterns: voluntary small groups, venting sessions, strength showing groups, concrete task groups, and social groups.

Stress is the emotional difference between what we would like to be (ego-ideal) and what we really are (reality). Dr. Hans Selye, a leading authority on stress argues that the unrelenting demand on the body to adapt to different forms of stress ultimately exhausts the body's adaptability, wears out vital organs, and leads to a variety of illnesses until death occurs.

We all have a mental picture of our ideal teacher and/or administrator whom we would like to become. This ego ideal picture motivates us to achieve and become this ideal person. Teachers experience stressful situations in the following school enviornment: 1) Discipline of students 2) Administrative expectations 3) Other teachers 4) Student achievement 5) Community and parents 6) Isolation in a bureaucracy. The way we attempt to solve our problems with our school environment depends upon our ego ideal. When we are successful our ego is stroked but when we fall short we become stressed. With enough stress we become burned out and develop

various types of physical illnesses. One needs to become aware of their ego ideal because often this ideal is a successful educator of 30 years past and in today's society they are out of place and distressed. Educators 30 years ago used a simple formula to solve many problems and that was "power". Today the use of power will place the educator in a very distressed position. We must attempt to understand our ego ideal and redefine it for today's society.

Once we understand our professional ego ideal it will assist us in understanding our personal ego ideal. Personal problems of stress contribute to our professional lives. Therefore we must define our ego ideal for our personal lives in order to achieve a better adjusted life.

When we fall short of our ego ideal either professionally or personally we become stressed. Often the things we do to bring about positive change is only causing the problem. An analysis of our attempts to solve our distress is needed.

Analysis

Teaching is becoming more stressful teachers today are assuming a wider variety of roles and tasks. Many of these roles are in direct conflict with one another. Teachers are presently being asked to promote career education, individualize instruction and mainstream handicapped children effectively. At the same time they are expected to spend more time teaching the basic skills of reading and math. Many children come to school with unmet needs of love, affection and communication

from a family constellation that is badly fractured. The classroom teacher is expected to be a diagnostician, guidance counselor, remediator, parent, record keeper, and evaluator as well as teacher. No one person can perform all of these roles well.

To determine the severity of teacher stress Fred C. Feitler and Edward Tokar collected data from more than 3000 K-12 public school teachers. "Nineteen percent of the high school teachers surveyed reported that their jobs were either very or extremely stressful compared to sixteen percent for junior high and thirteen percent for elementary school teachers. Of those urban teachers surveyed, twenty percent indicated that their jobs were very stressful compared to sixteen percent in suburban and only fourteen percent in rural schools. The majority of teachers in this study (58%) ranked 'individual pupils who continuously misbehave' as the number one cause of job-related stress." (Feitler, pp. 456-457)

Elaine G. Wangberg in the March, 1982 edition of Educational Leadership focused on the fact that teachers tend to work in isolation, even though they experience similar problems. "They need to develop environments where teachers can admit failures, share successes and support one another." (Wangberg, p. 453) All too often the individual tends to think she is the only one experiencing frustration and stress. It then becomes difficult for the teacher to admit that there are serious problems with a few students.

A six step process is involved in helping the overstressed teacher to come to terms with herself or himself to function more effectively. The first step is to become more aware of oneself. Wangberg identified some of the instruments that can be used to help identify sources of personal as well as professional stress:

> The Social Readjustment Rating Scale (Holmes & Rahe, 1967)
> The Wellness Inventory (Travis, 1977)
> NYSUT Survey on Teacher Stress (New York State United Teachers, 1979)
> Dismal Dozen Checklist (Kossack, 1980)
> Caretaker Survey (Roy, 1979)
> School Events Survey (Young, 1980)
> Q Sort Stress Survey (Manera and Wright, 1980)
> Stress Inventory (Sparks, 1979)
>
> (Wangberg, P. 452)

Often times it is very difficult for a teacher to honestly realize that her own teacher behaviors contribute to the forming of chronic discipline problems with certain students. Periodically the entire class should be given input into the delineation of the problems. One way to do this is to provide the students with a sheet of open ended sentence stems to which they can respond anonymously. If the students know the teacher genuinely wants their reactions they will respond openly and honestly. The teacher can obtain valuable information in this manner without putting students on the spot.

At first it will be only natural for the teacher to become defensive and threatened as she attempts to deal with information that tarnishes one's self image or damages the ego ideal. It will take time to work through the cognitive

dissonance involved. To help facilitate this process each teacher should be allowed to self select a "teacher buddy" to whom they can confide throughout the year. New teachers should be assigned one at the beginning of the year. The "teacher buddy's" primary responsibilities are to create an accepting, trusting atmosphere; effectively listen; and support the teacher.

Trying new behavior will be much easier if the teacher genuinely owns her part of the problem in chronic discipline problems with selective students. Students respect teachers who openly admit their mistakes publicly. Sincere efforts to change teacher behavior take time. It is important for the teacher to inform the class what she is trying to do and why. Asking their coopeartion will help. When the teacher initiates a change that represents a radical departure from the way she normally behaves she should expect things to be worse initially. Students may be testing the resolve of the teacher and/or having some last minute fun as they realize the party is over. The teacher should have the inner strength of will to persist over a length of time with any change.

As the teacher tries new behavior it is important that any minute changes in behavior on the part of students be acknowledged and appreciated. This can be done individually as well as to the group. A classroom climate where sincere, spontaneous public verbal statements of appreciation flow will establish a positive group cohesion. An Appreciation

Wall can be set up with newsprint so that anyone can acknowlege in writing positive, caring behaviors of anyone in the group. Individual, spontaneous efforts tend to be more valid. These attempts communicate to the students that the teacher is really serious about changing behavior and creating a different classroom climate.

The teacher should devise informal, random feedback devices to validate her efforts at making changes in her behavior. She should encourage the students to praise and acknowledge her in her efforts. Peers and/or the teacher buddy should be aware of what is being attempted and genuinely comment upon changes that are making a real difference in the behavior of the students. Periodic celebrations can be held to publicly proclaim the value of the changes that have taken place by students and teacher alike. Certificates of merit can be issued to all class members to acknowledge one unique positive aspect of that person. It is crucial to make sure that each individual certificate is special and different from the others.

Solutions

The honest attempt to individualize instruction requires the utilization of a variety of resource persons in the average classroom. The notion of one teacher for a group of twenty-five students is an anachronistic concept. The individual teacher should examine carefully her own teaching and learning style to determine strengths and weaknesses. Dr. Russell French

has created an instrument to assess one's perceptual teaching style. Once various patterns have been determined the teacher can utilize aides, paraprofessionals, practicum students, volunteers, community resource persons and/or student teachers to complement her style. An analysis of the students' learning styles will determine the compatibility between student learning style and the teaching style of the individual teacher. Dr. Russell French, Dr. Gilley, Dr. Cherry and Len Schaiper have been conducting research in seven perceptual learning styles: visual, aural, print, oral-interactive, haptic, kinesthetic, and olfactory. It appears that many teachers teach the way they learn best. Perhaps the discipline problems teachers experience with a certain few students can be due in part to an incompatibility between the teaching style and learning style of those students.

Team teaching offers a solution to the problem of providing quality individualized instruction. Teams should be formed on the basis of general philosophic compatibility and the <u>complementary</u> nature of the teaching and learning styles of the teachers involved. The teacher needs to team with other teachers who are strong in areas in which she is weak. Differences should be maximized to provide a variety of instructional strategies. <u>All</u> students in a group will be exposed to a variety of teaching styles to insure a better match. Chronic discipline problems and power struggles will be less likely to occur. As teachers develop group cohesion

they can insure a variety of interaction patterns to avoid the deadlocks that normally occur when individual students intereact with a teacher in a climate of mutual disgust. Teachers can more readily offer each other support in a team teaching situation. They can also learn from each other more easily.

"If we are to reduce stress we must provide teachers with greater support and rewards. School systems should provide teachers with environments and programs of support to help them cope with the high levels of stress they continue to experience." (Wangberg, p. 452)

The establishment of an ongoing support system is crucial if we are to deal with the problem of teacher stress effectively. Release time for teachers should be provided to demonstrate seriousness of purpose.

When initially creating the support groups it is important to begin with a small voluntary group. This group will meet to focus on burnout and analyze the problem. Ongoing building level venting sessions could be established to informally meet as the need arises to air gripes, frustrations and vent strong feelings. Individual teachers could support each other and take each other's classes in times of immediate crisis.

Groups need to be formed to help the teachers accept themselves and grow as professionals. A strength sharing type of support group could meet to identify individual strengths and positive qualities. Each member could utilize others to improve their own job performance by learning from each other

in the individual's area of strength. Many teachers suffering from burnout experience feelings of chronic cynicism and hopelessness. They become highly critical and feel overwhelmed by the complexity of serious problems. The formulation of concrete task groups needs to be established to solve easily definable problems. This will help teachers realize that they can control their destiny and produce change in the system. Cognitive groups could be established to address broader, abstract problems in more creative ways. Brainstorming various solutions, reading books on higher education, and utilizing outside speakers could stimulate the high cognitive, creative types of teachers who are susceptible to burnout due to lack of stimulation.

Social Groups need to be formed at various levels. Informal opinion leaders and gregarious socializers are good candidates to take the initiative in organizing these groups. The creation of informal volleyball, bowling or other recreational activities will also provide physical release. Various specific "hangouts" can be identified where teachers know they can meet to socialize and get to know each other.

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